



Indirect Speech, Politeness, Deniability, and Relationship Negotiation: Comment on Marina Terkourafi's "The Puzzle of Indirect Speech"

Citation

Pinker, Steven. 2011. Indirect Speech, Politeness, Deniability, and Relationship Negotiation: Comment on Marina Terkourafi's "The Puzzle of Indirect Speech". *Journal of Pragmatics* 43, no. 11: 2866–2868.

Published Version

doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2011.05.005

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:13041030>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Policy Articles, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#OAP>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

Indirect Speech, Politeness, Deniability, and Relationship Negotiation

(Comment on Marina Terfouraki's "The Puzzle of Indirect Speech")

Steven Pinker

Harvard University

The author is in the Department of Psychology, Harvard University, William James Hall 970, 33 Kirkland St., Cambridge, MA, USA; email pinker@wjh.harvard.edu.

In several recent publications (Lee & Pinker, 2010; Pinker, 2007a, 2007b; Pinker, Nowak, & Lee, 2008), my colleagues and I have proposed a new theory of indirect speech that builds on traditional approaches from linguistics and philosophy. These theories posit that indirect speech is a purely cooperative effort to maximize a social resource such as equity, face, or common ground, and accordingly, they tend to treat indirect speech as a form of politeness. Our theory of the Strategic Speaker supplements the traditional approaches with the insight from evolutionary psychology that most social interaction involves mixtures of cooperation and conflict rather than pure cooperation (Trivers, 1985; Pinker, 1997), and with theories of relationship-specific social psychology, which posit that human relationships fall into qualitatively discrete kinds (Fiske, 1991; Fiske, 1992; Pinker, 1997; Schelling, 1960; Trivers, 1985; Wilson & Daly, 1997). The discrete nature of human relationships meshes with the discrete nature of language to generate the phenomena of indirect speech. Specifically, we posit that the vagueness of indirect speech is deployed strategically when there is a need for a speaker to convey a request that inherently conflicts with the kind of relationship in force between the speaker and hearer. The hearer can infer the request and choose to act on it or not without incurring the tangible or emotional costs of switching to a new relationship model. In some cases this deniability may be first-order knowledge of the request by the hearer. In others it may be a higher-order deniability of common knowledge (knowledge of each other's knowledge), or of knowledge by real or imagined third parties, either of which may be necessary to ratify the relationship in their mutual understanding or in a larger social community.

We also tested competing predictions of the Theory of the Strategic Speaker and of traditional accounts. For example, we showed that the circumstances which call for extreme politeness (e.g., a needy request) differ from those that call for extreme indirectness (e.g., a potential relationship mismatch, such as from a bribe, a threat, or a sexual come-on). One has only to acknowledge the ludicrousness of a highly polite (as opposed to indirect) sexual overture to appreciate the difference (e.g., *I hate to trouble you, but do you think it might be possible to have sex? I'd really appreciate it*). The same incongruity, we showed, surrounds an off-record indirect wording of a needy request, such as a strong hint that the speaker needs to impose on the hearer's time; in such cases speakers favor politeness but not indirectness. In another critical test, we showed that indirect speech serves to keep certain kinds of knowledge (in particular, knowledge of a relationship-threatening request) *out of* common ground, rather than, as traditional accounts claim (e.g., Clark, 1996), maximizing or reinforcing the information that is in common ground. These experiments suffice to show that our theory is not just a reframing of traditional accounts. At the same time we explicitly built on the insights of Grice, Brown and Levinson, and others, and pointed out areas of overlap.

In this spirit I welcome the constructive analysis by Terfouraki (this issue). I agree, in particular, that indirect speech must involve some degree of cooperation; if that were lacking, people would not communicate at all, as we see in the idiom *to be in speaking terms*. I am grateful to her for her noting that the distinction between locutionary and perlocutionary cooperation is a helpful way of capturing those aspects of conversation that are cooperative and those that are potentially conflictual. I agree as well that social identity (which is related to our invocation of relational models) is not just a matter of individual choice but of social ratification. Indeed it is this very notion that underlies our appeal to common knowledge, which, we argue is essential to social ratification. The deniability of this relationship-ratifying common knowledge, we claimed, is a major function of indirect speech even when first-order deniability is

impossible. Finally, I agree that indirect speech may have multiple functions rather than falling under a single explanation.

Other of Terfouraki's arguments are less clear to me, possibly because of a lack of detail about the context of the speech examples. Her example (1), in which a mother informs a daughter, "The baby is going to the other room," is not obviously an indirect request in the first place. Tending to the baby is not a favor to the mother, and the utterance may simply have been the conveyance of factual information hitherto unknown to the daughter, which would prompt her to act in the interest of all three parties.

Even if (1) were intended as a request (say, if the daughter had known about the baby's trajectory, but for some reason still needed to be prodded into action), Terfouraki's assertion that "The function of off-record indirectness in such instances is to underline the interlocutors' common ground" is not obviously true. Surely the background knowledge that a baby can easily get into trouble and that both mother and daughter want to protect it was never in doubt, so it is unclear why there should be any need to reaffirm it at the expense of directness and clarity.

Terfouraki states the problem of explaining indirect speech in what strikes me as a counterproductive way: "Directness or explicitness [in example 1] is deemed unnecessary. Off-record indirect speech is enough to carry the message through." This makes it seem like direct speech is some kind of burden or special case, and that off-record indirect speech the natural default. But surely the inefficiency and potential for misunderstanding of indirect speech makes it important to show *why indirectness* is necessary, not why directness is. It's also unclear why knowledge of the baby's wanderings would have to be common knowledge for it to be effective. All the daughter needs to know is that her baby is in trouble; whether she knows that her mother knows that she knows is superfluous.

I argue that what Terfouraki calls an "additional bonus" to indirectness is in fact its principal function: to reaffirm the nature of the relationship between the mother and the daughter. Even here, I question Terfouraki's claim that the relevant psychological quality being reaffirmed is "closeness," since presumably the closeness between the mother and the daughter was never in doubt. Rather, in the modern West, the relationship between a parent and an adult child must transition from authority to communality, despite the parent's greater experience and, often, wisdom. Parents who continue the trappings of authority by bossing their grown children around, especially when it comes to the raising of grandchildren, may be perceived as meddling or domineering, as "continuing to treat me like a child." I suggest that if the mother was being indirect, it would be to reaffirm that she was treating the daughter as an equal despite the fact that at that moment she had knowledge that the daughter lacked and had good reason to direct the daughter into action. This claim is readily testable by assessing the relative naturalness of direct versus indirect versions of the request in cultures or subcultures in which parental authority continues to be wielded throughout a child's life, and in assessing the reactions of grown children in our own subculture to parental requests that are issued as orders versus framed indirectly.

It is difficult to comment on Terfouraki's second example, since she provides no specifics, but cites only a personal communication and an unpublished conference paper. But insofar as it refers to the use of indirectness by a nominal social superior, I'd suggest a similar analysis. It's not that the speaker wishes to put his or her superiority into common ground, as Terfouraki suggests. Since social superiority, as she notes, is marked by "a stern and cold architecture of social distance [and] asymmetry," one would expect a speaker to use directness, not indirectness, if putting her superiority into common ground were the goal. Nor is it clear why an unchallenged speaker would *want* to reassert his or her superiority as part of common ground. On the contrary, I suggest that indirectness allows the speaker to keep his or her social superiority *out of* common ground, despite its indisputable existence. That is, while neither party can plausibly deny (as first-order, individual knowledge) that the speaker is socially superior, indirectness allows them to plausibly deny *common* knowledge. Neither has to acknowledge that the other knows that she knows that the speaker is superior. This, in turn, allows the two to maintain the fiction that they are interacting as friends or other social equals (communality) rather than as superior and underling (authority). At least in the West, that social fiction in turn may be a consequence of an ongoing trend toward "informalization" (Lieberson, 2000; Wouters, 2007), in which Westerners increasingly avoid overt markers of authority relationships. (This historical phenomenon first noticed in the classic study of

second-person pronouns by Roger Brown and Albert Gilman; Brown & Gilman, 1960). Once again, our counter-claim is easily testable in studies of speakers' wording choices, and of hearers' reactions, within and across cultures.

We hope that probing these areas of agreement and disagreement will lead to fruitful empirical research and to an increased engagement between traditional linguistic approaches to indirect speech and newer models of social relationships from social psychology and anthropology.

References

- Brown, R. & Gilman, A. (1960). The pronouns of power and solidarity. In T. Sebeok (Ed.), *Aspects of style in language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Clark, H. H. (1996). *Using language*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fiske, A. P. (1991). *Structures of social life: The four elementary forms of human relations*. New York: Free Press.
- Fiske, A. P. (1992). The four elementary forms of sociality: Framework for a unified theory of social relations. *Psychological Review*, 99, 689-723.
- Lee, J. J. & Pinker, S. (2010). Rationales for indirect speech: The theory of the strategic speaker. *Psychological Review*.
- Lieberson, S. (2000). *A matter of taste: How names, fashions, and culture change*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Pinker, S. (1997). *How the mind works*. New York: Norton.
- Pinker, S. (2007a). The evolutionary social psychology of off-record indirect speech acts. *Intercultural Pragmatic*, 4, 437-461.
- Pinker, S. (2007b). *The stuff of thought: Language as a window into human nature*. New York: Viking.
- Pinker, S., Nowak, M. A., & Lee, J. J. (2008). The logic of indirect speech. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA*, 105, 833-838.
- Schelling, T. C. (1960). *The strategy of conflict*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Trivers, R. L. (1985). *Social evolution*. Reading, MA: Benjamin/Cummings.
- Wilson, M. & Daly, M. (1997). Relationship-specific social psychological adaptations. In G. R. Bock & G. Cardew (Eds.), *Characterizing human psychological adaptations*. New York: Wiley.
- Wouters, C. (2007). *Informalization: Manners and Emotions since 1890*. Los Angeles: Sage.